6 Online sexual grooming

Children as victims of online abuse

Elena Martellozzo

Introduction

Children do not exist in isolation. When they are born, they belong to a family and as they grow older they become part of a wider community, with its own culture and beliefs (Belsky, 1980). In today's digital age, children are not only exposed to the immediate community that visibly surrounds them, but also to that less visible and less tangible world of cyberspace. As a result, they are exposed to a new level of vulnerability that did not exist before. It can be argued that the emergence of communication technologies in our everyday lives may be considered a contributing factor to the increase in ways in which children may be sexually victimised. Children may be victimised online in a number of ways: they may become the subjects of indecent images; they may be groomed for sexual abuse which takes place offline or they may be groomed online and the abuse may be carried out via the use of webcams, for example.

Over the past decade, the greatest public, policy and media concern for children's safety on the internet has been that of children being sexually abused by someone they met online. However, there are many other online risks that children and young people can encounter when online. Potential risks can include: exposure to adult and age inappropriate content; contact, which includes sexual exploitation and the production of indecent images of children; and conduct, where harassment and sexting are potential outcomes (Phippen, 2009; Ahern & Mechling, 2013; Webster et al., 2014). This chapter gives focus to the problem of online contact, in particular the phenomenon of online sexual grooming, which often features other forms of risk such as indecent images, sexting, harassment and bullying also identified in this book.

Effects of communication technologies on online behaviour

It is not possible to determine who is more likely to become a victim of online abuse and why, without exploring the online environment and its unique characteristics that influence people's online behaviour. Possibly one of the most distinct characteristics is that of anonymity, although, it might be worth noting that it is becoming more difficult to use mainstream internet fora anonymously

because of, for example, Facebook's "real name" policies. When communicating via social networks, email, instant messaging, etc., the physical boundaries that exist in the real world are completely removed. In this way people can be more open to the increase of self-disclosure, as they do not have to deal with face-to-face reactions or unpleasant arguments.

Elisabeth Staksrud and her colleagues (Staksrud et al., 2013) found that the use of social networking sites (SNS) encourages the sharing of personal information, which may be mundane or more intimate information. Online anonymity allows people to feel disinhibited, to do and say things in a cyber context that they would never consider in the real world. Sadly, the possibility of online anonymity is appealing not only for abusers who wish to groom children and hide their true identity (Martellozzo, 2015), but also to young people who are often perceived as naturally curious, inexperienced, thrill seeking (Atkinson & Newton, 2010) and impulsive (Romer, 2010). John Suler (2004:324) argues that the online "disinhibition effect", fuelled by anonymity, may reveal, "the true needs, emotions, and self attributes that dwell beneath surface personality presentations".

According to Suler, several online factors may cause disinhibition. The first he describes as dissociative anonymity, which enables people to dissociate their actions from their real world identity, making them feel more open and less vulnerable. Therefore, individuals are able to alter their identities, became aggressive or more sexualised, for example. Invisibility is also a distinctive feature of the online world, although interrelated with anonymity. Suler (2004) explains: "There are some important differences. In the text communication of e-mail, chat, instant messaging, and blogs, people may know a great deal about each other's identities and lives. However, they still cannot see or hear each other" (ibid., 2004:322). In other words, it refers to individuals not being physically seen or heard which, in turn may disinhibit them, and motivate them to visit sites and behave in ways they would not do in the physical world. Suler argues that even if the online identity is visible, the opportunity to be physically invisible amplifies disinhibition in the sense that allows people to say what they wish to say openly without being concerned with the consequences, such as embarrassing themselves or being rejected. Furthermore, communication online is not synchronised, that is, people do not interact with each other in real-time or at regular intervals. Suler calls this characteristic of online communications "asynchronicity" and he explains that because communication is not happening in real time, the person communicating does not have to deal with the immediate reaction of the people they are communicating with, further adding to the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004:323). The last factor given by Suler is minimisation of status and authority online, where the absence of cues in dress, body language, and environmental settings reduce the effect of people's authority (Suler, 2004). In real world terms, authority figures such as teachers, police officers or even parents can express their status and power through a uniform, facial expressions and in the symbols of their environmental settings such as a police car or station, a classroom, or the home etc. The absence of these cues in the milieu environment of cyberspace may reduce the

impact of their authority, which in turns allows people, particularly young people, to speak out and misbehave more. Suler argues that as cyberspace grows and continues to create open new environments "many of its inhabitants see themselves as innovative, independent-minded explorers and pioneers. This atmosphere and this philosophy contribute to the minimising of authority" (Suler, 2004:324). Sexual grooming takes place in this anonymous and disinhibited environment, where limited possibilities for regulation and control exist.

Defining online sexual grooming

Online grooming is a *modus operandi* that is commonly associated with sexual abuse and it can involve both children and adults. However, it is a method that perpetrators can use to prepare a person to commit a number of different other crimes: from cyberbullying to terrorism.

John McCarthy and Nathan Gaunt (2005) define the phenomenon of online sexual grooming "as a type of online behaviour designed to 'seduce' or lure children into sexual behaviour or conversations with or without children's knowledge" (ibid., 2005), with the intent of arranging to meet the child in the "real world" to sexually abuse them. Prior to arranging the meeting, the abuser would attempt to form a virtual "friendship" with the children, with the intention of physically meeting them and carrying out the abuse. However, sexual grooming may also be carried out in order to prepare a child for another person to abuse (Whittle et al., 2013). Therefore, a more condign definition is the one provided by Craven et al. (2006), which states that online grooming is:

> a process by which a person prepares a child, significant adults and the environment for the abuse of this child. Specific goals include gaining access to the child, gaining the child's compliance and maintaining the child's secrecy to avoid disclosure. This process serves to strengthen the offender's abusive pattern, as it may be used as a means of justifying or denying their actions.
>
> (Ibid., 2006:297)

A particular problem that occurs when we attempt to define the grooming process is that it is often not possible to establish when it starts or stops (Gillespie, 2004:10–11). In his latest pioneering work, Michael Seto[1] (2013) explains that there are three main variables that contribute to the commission of sexual abuse against children. These are: an antisocial trait in the offender; a sexual interest in children; and situational factors such as access to children. He argues that the presence of antisocial behaviour and opportunity factors can be the distinguishing factors that may trigger contact abuse. His 'Motivation-Facilitation Model of Sexual Offending against Children', is supported by the findings from the most recent meta-analysis on internet sex offenders, which recognises that the main predictors of recidivistic contact sex offending amongst offenders who use indecent images of children are being antisocial, having

access to children and the lack of barriers to acting on one's deviant impulses (Babchishin, Hanson & VanZuylen, 2014).

Grooming is a crucial part of the so-called 'cycle of abuse' (Wolf, 1985; Finkelhor, 1986; Eldridge, 1998; Sullivan and Beech, 2004) and it does not only take place online, although this is a recent and major concern. The grooming process consists of sex offenders socialising and grooming children over prolonged periods of time to gain their trust and prepare them for sexual abuse and to ensure that abuse is not discovered or disclosed (Webster et al., 2014). Recent studies on sex offenders' grooming behaviour support the idea that the Internet does not create new stages in the cycle of abuse, but allows the cycle of abuse to be accelerated (Martellozzo, 2012, 2015; Webster et al., 2012).

Classifying online offenders

Up until very recently, the figure of the online offender, or even the concept of a child being sexually groomed and abused via the internet, was difficult to fathom. A clear understanding of the online offender is necessary to inform our understanding of how online sexual grooming occurs and the vulnerability of children and young people when online. Research in the area of sexual abuse against children has repeatedly shown that sex offenders cannot be easily 'picked out' of a crowd (Grubin, 1998; Stanko, 1990). There is no consistent model or typology into which they can be accurately placed for the purpose of identification and isolation – and public denunciation. This contention can also be applied to online forms of child sexual abuse. Notwithstanding this caveat, a number of empirical studies have been carried out to ascertain, through the development of typologies and classifications of internet grooming offenders, what characterises these individuals and how they groom children online.

Table 6.1 summarises some of the key and most recent existing typologies of internet child sex offenders.

Independent of these classifications, online groomers seem to form two distinct groups: those whose offences relate to fantasy and meeting sexual needs online, and those whose primary intention is to meet young people offline to carry out the abuse (Briggs et al., 2011). Online, individuals have the opportunity to explore the dark side of their sexuality by assuming desired identities and by disclosing as much or as little about themselves as they wish to others (Cooper, McLoughlin & Campbell, 2000). Moreover, by hiding behind their fictitious avatar, they may explore any opportunities cyberspace may offer, including possibilities to sexually abuse children (Websteret al., 2014; Martellozzo, 2012).

Between 2004 and 2008, I carried out an empirical study seeking to understand and explain the problem of online child sexual abuse and the way in which investigative tactics and operational procedures were employed by the London Metropolitan Police High Technological Crime Unit (HTCU) and Paedophile Unit. During this study, I observed one of the first Metropolitan Police undercover operations carried out in London, where a fictitious girl's profile was set

Table 6.1 Classification of online sex offenders

Sullivan and Beech (2004)	**Type 1** Collects images as part of a larger part of sexual offending, possibly including contact offending.	**Type 2** Collects images to feed a developing sexual interest in children which may escalate and cross-over to contact offending.	**Type 3** Accesses images out of curiosity which is unlikely to lead to contact sexual offending in most cases.		
Beech et al. (2008)	**Periodically prurient** Accesses impulsively, or out of a general curiosity.	**Fantasy only** Accesses/trades images to fuel a sexual interest in children; no known history of contact sexual offending.	**Direct victimisation** Uses online technology as part of a larger pattern of sex offending, including child abuse material and the grooming of children online in order to facilitate contact sexual offending.	**Commercial exploitation** Criminally minded individual who produces or trades images to make money.	
Elliot and Ashfield (2011)	**Solo type 1** Solo offenders who abuse adolescent children (the euphemistic 'teacher/lover" group[2]).	**Solo type 2** Solo offenders who abuse pre-pubescent children.	**Psychiatrically disordered** Have a variety of victim types. These individuals' behaviours may be attributed to a psychiatric disorder.	**Financial SOs** Motivated by commercial profit; provides victims for child molesters in return for money.	**Male associated** (a) male-coerced (those who participate under the explicit threat of emotional abuse or physical violence) (b) active male-accompanied (those who play an interested or active role) (c) passive male-accompanied (those who provide opportunities for abuse or do not act to prevent abuse, but do not take an active role).

Gottschalk (2011)	**Distorted attachment** Wants a relationship with young people.	**Adaptable online groomer** Wants to satisfy his/her own needs and sees the victim as mature and capable.	**Hyper-sexualised** Possesses child abuse material and has significant online contact with other paedophiles.
Martellozzo (2012)	**Hyper-confident groomers** May create a decent (fully clothed photo) or indecent (naked or semi-naked photo) profile. Friendships normally develop after the profile is added to the child's list of friends.	**Hyper-cautious groomers** Are so concerned about being caught that they are not willing to furnish details about themselves until confident they are speaking to a "real" person.	
Webster et al. (2012)	**Intimacy-seeking** Do not have previous convictions for sexual offending or engage in networking with other sex offenders and are unlikely to have child abuse material. They are likely to engage in an intimate relationship with the younger person and believe the contact to be consensual.	**Adaptable style** Tend to have previous convictions for sexual offending against children and view young people as mature and capable. Not avid networkers or collectors of indecent images. They adapt their approach according to the young person being engaged and their reactions.	**Hyper-sexualised** Tend to have significant collections of indecent images and network extensively with other online sex offenders. They use deception and contact with young people is likely to progress rapidly and be of a sexual nature. Progression to contact offences with the young person is less likely with this type than the other types.

up by undercover officers to attract online groomers resulting in the girl's profile being viewed by more than 1,300 individuals in the short space of time of one month (Martellozzo, 2012). Of these, more than 450 individuals with adult male profiles initiated contact with the 'fictitious' child, and 80 became virtual 'friends', communicated regularly with the girl in a sexual manner. Young (2001:300) defines such individuals as 'fantasy users', and distinguishes those who utilise online chat rooms and instant messaging services for the express purpose of role-playing in online fantasy sex chat.

Quayle et al. (2014), in an exploratory qualitative study with 14 men convicted of online sexual grooming, also found that all of the men interviewed admitted that meeting a young person online enables sexual fantasies, which lead to sexual pleasure. Within this group of respondents, five men arranged to meet their victim offline for sexual purposes. Similarly, in my study (Martellozzo, 2012) of 23 suspects, nine turned up to meet the undercover officer posing as a young girl, a further five had arranged to meet 'her' but did not turn up or cancelled at the last minute. Unfortunately, it was not possible to establish what made some of the subjects turn up to meet the 'girl' and others to cancel. However, fear of apprehension alone may have prevented some subjects from turning up to a pre-arranged meeting.

The law

Sexual grooming using information and communication technology has been criminalised in England and Wales since 2013, Scotland since 2005 and in some European Union (EU) countries for a number of years: Ireland, Norway and France (2007), the Netherlands and Spain (2010) and Austria and Italy (2012) (IRC, 2012). In the United Kingdom, Section 15 of the Sexual Offences Act (SOA) 2003 makes 'meeting a child following sexual grooming' a serious offence. This applies to internet-enabled technologies (smart phones, mobile phones, game consoles and tablets) and the 'real world' where a person arranges to meet a child who is under 18, having communicated with them on at least one previous occasion (in person, via the internet or via other technologies), with the intention of performing sexual activity on the child (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2008).

The grooming legislation in the UK has recently been updated. Section 67 of the Serious Crime Act 2015 creates a new offence of sexual communication with a child, which helps ensure that young people are fully protected by the law and allow the authorities to intervene earlier to prevent more serious offending against children. The new offence criminalises a person aged 18 years or over who communicates with a child under 16 (who the adult does not reasonably believe to be 16 or over), if the communication is sexual or if it is intended to elicit from the child a communication which is sexual. 'Sexual Grooming' has also been added to the Crimes Amendment Act 2005 in New Zealand. Under Australian law, grooming occurs when a person uses an internet or telephone device to send an indecent communication to a young person under the age of 16. The legislation in the UK differs in that the sexual grooming offence applies

both to the internet and the 'real world' whereas legislation in other countries addresses only electronic grooming via the internet and mobile phones. While the term 'grooming' has not been defined in international law the term 'solicitation' is defined in international law, for example in the European Commission Directive. In some jurisdictions such as Canada and the US, the term 'luring' is used instead and it is applied to minors who are younger than 16 years of age.

Children as victims of online sexual abuse: exploring the risk factors

The vast majority of children and young people's online experiences and interactions are positive and, for most, their internet and technology use delivers significant benefits in terms of social, educational and creative engagements. The use of technologies has become such an integral part of their daily existence, that the distinction between their online and offline activities is now redundant. The online and offline worlds have converged in such a way that one feeds into the other, each influencing and shaping the other (Fogela & Nehmadb, 2009). So, for example, a young person may meet someone on holiday abroad and this new relationship, despite the geographical distance, and possibly the time zone difference, can continue online and become a significant friendship. Similarly, friendships may start in the online environment and develop into deep and meaningful experiences for those involved, even if a physical meeting never occurs.

Adolescents, and many adults, have embraced the openness, anonymity and the freedom of expression that the internet offers. Some are more likely to engage in risky behaviours, putting themselves in danger and becoming more open to the attention of those who wish to abuse them. There is little research evidence to ascertain with confidence the characteristics of exactly who is more likely to become a victim of online abuse. Nevertheless, from what we know, it is possible to state that gender is one of the key factors (Whittle et al. 2013). Although there are inconsistent research findings on whether boys use the internet more than girls in developed nations, we have found that they are more likely to reveal personal information to strangers online (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2016), whereas girls are more at risk of becoming victims of online abuse (Baumgartner et al., 2010; Wolak et al., 2008). However, this is not to say that boys are safer than girls. On the contrary, it may be possible that boys simply appear to be less at risk than girls because, if they are victimised, they may have problems reporting abuse to the authorities because of sex-role stereotyping and the heavily negative stigma it carries (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2008).

In relation to offline abuse, Finkelhor (1984) states that "boys will be less likely to report abuse as long as it is considered unmanly to ask for help or suffer a hurt and as long as being the victim of a sexual assault is threat to masculinity" (ibid., 1984:233).

In other words, boys may not report abuse because of the emasculating experience of being abused and being seen as victims. What needs to be acknowledged is that boys find it difficult to comprehend that they are also at risk of

becoming victims of online sexual abuse (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2004). In their research on behalf of the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) exploring internet abuse amongst young people in England, Julia Davidson and Elena Martellozzo (2012) found that this problem also repeatedly emerges in the sphere of online abuse. Some of the children that took part in the CEOP research believe that girls are more at risk than boys and therefore boys behave with greater disinhibition when online.

Furthermore, same sex-attracted boys in particular may feel confused and insecure about their sexuality, which can be easily picked up by callous online sex offenders (Whittle et al., 2013), who are overwhelmingly male (Wolak et al., 2008; Martellozzo, 2012). Clearly this is a gender stereotype that needs to be taken into account when looking at issues of vulnerability.

Age is another important key risk factor that deserves attention for the understanding of online victimisation. In the child sexual abuse literature, some studies suggest that abuse is most prevalent before puberty (Children's Bureau and Department of Health and Human Services, 2010) while others suggest that adolescent children are mostly at risk (Bebbington et al., 2011). Quayle (2010) argues that pre-pubescent youth are more at risk of victimisation through sexual computer mediated crimes than children under the age of nine. One possible explanation for this heightened risk in older children may be due to the much higher level of online communication and variety of access platforms for older children (Ólafsson et al., 2013), together with the fact that they are simply more knowledgeable regarding technology and favourable to exploration, including sexual exploration.

Undoubtedly, social networking sites and more recently the rise of messaging apps like 'WhatsApp' and image sharing apps, like Snapchat and Instagram, have captured the interest of many adolescents and young adults, and are a ubiquitous influence in how they both develop and socialise with others (Tiffany A. Pempek et al., 2009). Recent British research conducted by the Office of Communications (OFCOM, 2016), examining the nature of access and use of the internet among a national sample of children aged five to 15, showed that the vast majority of children use the internet, with over 88 per cent having access to the internet at home. Furthermore, the average 16- to 24-year-old now spends just under 9 hours a day with online media and communications, compared to an adult person, who spends 25 hours in an entire week on it, up from 9 hours in 2005 (OFCOM, 2016). This is quickly becoming a reality also for children from the developing world where internet penetration and use of mobile technology has increased exponentially. For example, the International Communications Union (ITU, 2011) shows that one in three children in the Arab States are online, and 20.7 per cent in Africa, are online, with that number rising annually. Furthermore, recent research conducted in the Kingdom of Bahrain (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2016), also shows that the majority of adolescents and young adults utilise social networking sites and that the number of memberships increases with age. Julia Davidson and Elena Martellozzo found that among those children and young people (aged 10 to 18) surveyed, the use of such sites is nearly

universal. It is evident that there has been an increase in the amount of time young people are spending online, with nearly one-quarter of those surveyed responding that they spend more than four hours online in any given day. The mean time spent was 2.58 with a standard deviation of 1.75, in other words two-thirds of the sample of school youth spent between 0.83 and 4.33 hours per week online. Furthermore, the survey data suggested that doing homework/research online (65.2 per cent) was one of the most common online activities. One young person stated that the internet was a useful tool 'for looking up things I do not know' (male, age 13), demonstrating a keen interest in auto-didactic and information gathering. Many were using instant messaging (45.6 per cent) to 'communicate with my friends' (female, age 14) and 'spending time' with friends (51.1 per cent), and they were communicating with their friends through 'social media apps, like Snapchat and Instagram' (female, age 14).

Another explanation as to why older children are more vulnerable to online grooming is related to common intrapersonal features such as low self-esteem, emotional disturbances and psychological disorders (Webster et al., 2012). Sonia Livingstone and her colleagues found that across Europe, young people with mental health issues are more likely to become victims of online dangers and to be more affected by the negative experience (Livingstone et al., 2011). Furthermore, a possible lower level of supervision and control provided by caregivers to the older groups in comparison to that offered to children 11 years old and below (Davidson & Martellozzo, 2016), may also increase the risk of becoming an online victim of abuse. It may be the case that increased supervision can lower the risks that young people are willing to take, through increasing the fear of being caught. However, it is becoming more difficult to supervise children and young people, given the recent, sudden boom in the availability of internet-enabled devices that can be carried around, outside the controlled home environment (Vincent, 2015). This online mobility can certainly be interpreted as a positive opportunity for children, in the sense that they know can create their own personal connection to the internet without the pressure of being supervised by adults (ibid., 2015:1). However, Eric Rice (2012) and his colleagues (Rice et al., 2012) found that American adolescents with daily access to the internet through a mobile phone are more likely to report being solicited for online sex, being sexually active and having sex with partners that they met online. Nonetheless, high levels of access alone are not a necessary, or a sufficient cause, of online victimization. Other factors, presented later in this chapter, may underpin it.

Furthermore, as shown in my research previously discussed, the fictitious accounts of young girls created by undercover police officers to attract online groomers were not designed with any stereotypical vulnerable child in mind (Martellozzo, 2012). The details of the children's life and possible vulnerabilities could only be captured during the interaction between the 'child' and the suspect. As Whittle et al. (2013) argue, this could mean that any child could be vulnerable to seduction by any adult online, by simply being accessible to potential online predators. However, "it is likely that only the vulnerable responds while the resilient remains unaffected" (Whittle et al., 2013:142). Finding potential child victims may

not happen as quickly, as not all children are at risk of online abuse, as argued by Sonia Livingstone: "the identification of online risk does not imply that harm will follow, nor that all users are equally effected; rather, it is a probabilistic judgment regarding an outcome that depends on the particular and contingent interaction between user and environment" (Livingstone et al., 2011:3).

Online risks in some cases may lead to harm but in others, they may facilitate resilience (Livingstone et al., 2011:13). However, it appears to be the case that offline vulnerability extends its consequences online, as risk migrates from traditional to new sites. Therefore, children who are 'vulnerable' and risk-taking offline are more likely to be susceptible to online abuse. Quayle et al.'s (2014) sample of respondents claimed that they were only interested in young people who showed an interest in them. Furthermore, these men claimed they were seeking for young people, whose profiles were revealing certain information, including images. The researchers argued:

> Such information was used to both fuel fantasy, facilitate contact with young people and to accrue a body of information that enabled this skillful manipulation of technological platforms in the absence of historical expertise. This use of technology allowed for the compartmentalization of offending behaviour away from every-day activities and enabled the majority of these men to live apparently 'normal' lives while at the same time engaging in high rates of illegal sexual behaviour.
>
> (Quayle et al., 2014:374)

Explaining the under-reporting of child sexual abuse (CSA)

What makes it difficult to determine the extent of child sexual abuse, whether it takes place online or offline, is that official criminal statistics describing the incidence of sexual offences are unreliable indicators of the true prevalence of this illegal behaviour in society. Research conducted by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (Bunting, 2005) provides concerning evidence that one in four males and one in three females will experience sexual abuse before they reach the age of eighteen and only one in eight children who are sexually abused are identified by professionals (OCC, 2015). Translated in different terms, in the UK this would account for over 20 per cent of the population. Similarly, research conducted in the United States show that one in 10 children will become victims of sexual abuse by the age of 18 and that of those who are sexually abused, 20 per cent are abused before the age of eight (www.d2l.org). Whatever the accurate figure is, it is a serious problem and far greater than recorded crime statistics would suggest.

One of the main obstacles impeding the development of a coherent and reliable overview of the nature and extent of child sexual abuse across different countries and jurisdictions is this lack of reporting. Very few children disclose sexual abuse and even fewer disclose their abuse when the actual abuse has occurred via new technologies (Allnock, 2010). The silent nature of the victims

of abuse has been well documented in recent times and has been considered closely by charities specialising in child protection and the prevention of cruelty to children (see, for example, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the internet Watch Foundation, the Lucy Faithful Foundation in the UK; the Australian Childhood Foundation in Australia; Prometeo in Italy etc.). The reasons for this silence and therefore for the significant level of underreporting are complex and varied. Cawson et al. (2000:83), in a study on child maltreatment in the UK found that three-quarters (72 per cent) of sexually abused children did not tell anyone about the abuse at the time. Twenty seven per cent told someone later. Around a third (31 per cent) still had not told anyone about their experience(s) by early adulthood.

Jean La Fontaine (1990) suggested that this large percentage of unreported cases is a symptom of an uncomfortable silence around the topic. It is important that the matter of silence is understood, as it relates to the issues such as a lack of understanding of sexual matters, combined with feelings of guilt, embarrassment, and/or shame. What may help the formulation of a constructive answer to why children fail to report sexual abuse is the analysis and evaluation of the seduction, or grooming process, which commences long before any physical contact (Cawson et al., 2000), assuming anything physical happens at all (Martellozzo, 2015). The grooming process usually begins with the identification of the appropriate child victim and it continues, often for a long time, through careful and meticulous research about the interests, passions and weaknesses of the child (Lanning, 2005:56).

Elena Martellozzo (2012) showed that the process of grooming may never leave the comfortable environment of cyberspace, where the offender can remain anonymous. According to Quayle et al. (2014), this high level of anonymity benefits sex offenders greatly: it allows offenders to manipulate their identity; to avoid detection by selecting sites that do not require registration; to enable the control of privacy and to move freely from one platform to another. The online abuse may involve different forms of criminal online sexual behaviour such as encouraging children to hold sexual conversations, exposing themselves online via webcams, perhaps leading to pressure to engage in, and talk about sexual behaviour. An abuser may be looking for young people to engage in this sort of behaviour in locations that are used predominantly by young people such as teen chatrooms or social networking sites. Preferential sex offenders know how to select a child for potential sexual abuse: they are usually very good at obtaining cooperation and gaining control of the child through well-planned seduction that employs adult authority, attention and gifts (Finkelhor, 1986; Finkelhor, 1994) and possibly bribery.

Thus, given the complex strategies that sex offenders employ to reach their aims, it is understandable that many victims fail to realise the ultimate goal of their perpetrators. In the online word, despite the lack of physical contact between the abuser and the child, children may be traumatised and harmed by online abuse and may find it difficult to talk about. As this teen age girl, groomed on the internet, states:

> I couldn't wait to get back from school, switch on my computer and get chatting with him. I can't believe he'd hurt other girls. I felt I could trust him with my life.
>
> (Lucy Faithfull Foundation, 2016:4)

Even when they do realise that attention, affection and gifts were only offered as means toward exploitation, they may find it difficult to report the abuse. Difficulties may arise due to a strong bond created with the offender over time, or through feelings of guilt and a sense of compulsion to inform the offender of their decision first, thus placing themselves at risk of being persuaded to remain silent (Lanning, 2005). Indeed, the offender may continue to manipulate the child even after disclosure has been made and an investigation has begun – for example, by making the child feel guilty or disloyal (ibid.). Some prevalent reasons why children do not disclose their sexual abuse are explained below.

The non-violent nature of CSA

La Fontaine (1990) has indicated that, contrary to public opinion, the vast majority of child sexual abuse CSA is of a non-physically violent nature. This is not an understatement of the extreme emotional and psychological violence involved in sexual abuse. Usually, CSA begins with relatively inappropriate touching by a familiar adult whom the child trusts. In this manner, the child does not become distressed and is unaware of the implications of what is happening. This behaviour gradually continues and becomes more and more sexual in nature, so the child becomes accustomed to what is happening. This is what Gallagher (2000) defines as 'entrapment', i.e. the process in which "perpetrators draw children into abusive situations and make it difficult for them to disclose" (Gallagher, 2000:810). He argues that this method consists of a number of techniques, but "chief among these is the involvement of children in increasingly intimate physical contact, and the provision of a variety of inducements, whether these are material, illicit or emotional in nature" (Gallagher, 2000:810). Because of this gradual nature of abuse, some children cannot define such behaviour as wrong until a later stage.

Berliner and Conte (1990) also stated that most children did not understand initially that they were being abused. Many victims later realise that they have engaged willingly in the previous behaviour and feel that it is too late to stop it (Lanning, 2005). However, these assertions cannot be used to explain intra-familial sexual abuse when this is carried out with the use of extreme physical violence. They can, however, be used to explain online grooming. As discussed previously in this chapter, research suggests that grooming online can be faster, or can take place over a long period of time (Martellozzo, 2012; Webster et al., 2013) but it is always anonymous. As a result, children tend to trust an online 'friend' more than they would trust someone that they have just met face-to-face. Therefore, sex offenders who wish to groom children for the purpose of abusing them are able stay anonymous and access any personal information of the child,

particularly if the child has not placed particular emphasis on ensuring that his/her online digital privacy and security are robust.

As stated by this 13-year-old boy who met his chat room friend online:

> She was great. I felt I could talk to her about anything. It felt like she was my best friend. When I met her, 'she' turned out to be 'he' and was much older than me. He frightened and hurt me.

Sex offenders who groom children online are not restricted by space, time or access and they are not antagonised by those responsible for protecting their children, as they would be in the real world.

Use of threats and coercion

Threats are by far the most common way to induce compliance with sexual abuse (Featherstone & Evans, 2004). However, the most common form of threats used is to ask the child what would happen if the abuse were to be disclosed. The abuser typically insinuates that the child would be taken away from their home, the family would be broken up, and the abuser would go to jail (this is particularly convincing in intra-familial abuse cases where the abuser is someone close to the child). Supporting this argument is the claim of Louise, a 14-year-old girl, who, after months of abuse, called the UK's ChildLine and confessed:

> My stepfather makes me have sex with him. I want to stop, but I don't want to tell the police. I think they'll think it's my fault and will break up the family.
>
> (NSPCC, 2007)

This threat to remove the child from his or her family environment remains a very potent deterrent. Furthermore, the evidence (e.g. Featherstone & Evans, 2004) suggests that when children do disclose, it tends to be to family members, as they often are reluctant to approach authority figures and statutory services.

When Eddie, a 15-year-old boy, called ChildLine, he explained:

> I told a teacher what had been happening and she got social services to come talk to me, but I wouldn't say who had done it. It would break my Mum's heart.
>
> (Featherstone & Evans, 2004)

Children's ignorance and innocence

Children's ignorance and innocence are major sources of their own weakness. Children and young people often struggle with making decisions and are impulsive and risk taking. As Charlotte Walsh (2011) explains, this is to do with

the frontal lobe, responsible for executive functioning and decision-making processes, that has not completed developing until the beginning of our third decade of life. Therefore, children and young people are likely to act in an impulsive manner, both offline, but more so when online (Livingstone & O'Brien, 2014), given the anonymous and disinhibited nature of the internet.

When the abuse starts and finishes in the real world or it moves from the online sphere to offline physical contact (Quayle & Ribisl, 2013), victim accounts indicate that children believe that the abuse is their fault and it is them who ought to be despised and punished (NSPCC, 2007). Sex offenders often use this to their advantage (Miller, 1997).

Arguably, the innocence and ignorance of children has been compounded by the lack of sex education in schools and families. One issue in this regard has been the role of religion. For example, in the 1990s, in Catholic countries like Ireland or some parts of Italy, schools were run predominantly by the Church. Therefore, children grew up with little or no formal sex education. Thus, if children received such an education, it usually came within the context of Catholic dogma, with little or no mention of the sexual act. Parents, who had experienced the same education as their children and had listened to regular sermons in church on the possible evils of extra-marital sexual activity, had difficulty teaching their children about sex. Therefore, those children who were abused may have had little or no knowledge of what was happening to them, or, if they did, may have understood it in a Catholic, guilt-ridden manner. This produced additional difficulties for those who were abused at that time. In the past, the lack of knowledge and education may have been a key contributory factor for the perpetration of child sexual abuse. Today sex education is covered in Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) lessons under the National Curriculum in the UK and awareness is more present, however appropriate and inappropriate sexual behaviour is still not properly addressed (Martellozzo et al., 2017).

The child's 'love' for the abuser

Elaine Sharland (Sharland et al., 1996) suggests that children 'love' their abuser as parent, sibling, or friend. The type of love a child has must be differentiated from the so-called love that an abuser has for a child. Children love their abusers in the purest sense – they respect their abuser, do not want them to get into trouble, and thus do not want to lose them as friend. This can lead to a terrible dilemma for the child, even when they are fully aware that they are being abused. The following are two observations noted by social workers after interviewing children about their abuser:

> The child doesn't want him (the abuser) to go to prison. He fears he'll be hurt there.
>
> Throughout, the child was confused. He knew the man had been wrong but he felt affection for him. It was very hard to reassure him.
>
> (Sharland et al., 1996:139)

Silence is recognised mainly from the subjective experience of others who have come forward and verbalised their own experiences. Nevertheless, experts can never quantify the silence that lies at the heart of the community. Professionals and the media often discuss abuse in terms of 'unrecognised' or 'underestimated' reports. This in turn creates the notion of an invisible risk, something that is unquantifiable and unknown. As a consequence:

> the debate on child abuse has seen the clash of opinion about dimensions of the problem. Many specialists adopt the tip of the iceberg approach. They claim that the incidence of abuse is far greater that society is prepared to accept. Consequently, many of those involved in the sphere of child protection are convinced that what is invisible is more relevant that the so-called facts.
>
> (Furedi, 1997:40)

As a result of this process, there is a 'disproportionality' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 1994) surrounding reports of child sexual abuse.

Conclusions

The internet offers wonderful opportunities for learning, communicating and socialising. However, its complex architecture can present many challenges, particularly to the most vulnerable and ill-informed children. As this chapter argued, the reasons why children and young people become victims of online abuse are numerous. Although research in this area is still in its infancy, it is possible to claim that young people, particularly female teenagers, are those that are mostly at risk. Other vulnerabilities presented here are: intrapersonal features such as low self-esteem, emotional disturbances and psychological disorders; high levels of internet access; risk taking behaviours; poor parental involvement; and lack of reporting. As explained earlier, the reasons why children do not report sexual abuse can be complex and varied in both the real and the cyber world. One of the reasons why online abuse tends not to be reported is because most children do not realise they have been abused and do not understand what constitutes virtual abuse (Berelowitz et al., 2012). Should online grooming at some point become physical abuse in the real world, then those reasons for not disclosing abuse to responsible parents or authorities already discussed equally apply here. There are certain important spatial and temporal dynamics to the online grooming of children such as 'the paradox of online intimacy', in which spatially distant strangers effectively abuse vulnerable children within the intimate surroundings of the child's home and often without meeting them face-to-face.

Furthermore, there are recent concerns around the overlapping phenomenon of online child sexual extortion, sextortion and peer-perpetrated abuse. There is increasing recognition that children who abuse others using technology may not always be aware of the illegal nature of the behaviour (e.g. a boy who sends a girl

a picture of his penis as a way of asking her out) and are not receiving formal educational intervention for example through PSHE classes which could help them to recognise the abusive/illegal nature of sending sexual images to others. This raises some interesting challenges to the traditional notion of the 'child as victim' and defines new ways in which children have become vulnerable to perpetration – blurring the boundary between victim and perpetrator in the online context.

In the past few years, many efforts have been made to ensure that awareness messages about online abuse and the consequences of online risk taking behaviour have reached out to children and young people (a good example is the police 'Think Before you Send' campaign in England www.westyorkshire.police.uk/sexting). And although education and awareness is improving, it is clear that more needs to be done in ensuring that children are fully aware of such online harms and are enabled to respond appropriately and safely. There is an additional need to ensure that children are taught to become responsible digital citizens, aware of ethical online behaviour and their online rights from a young age.

Notes

1 Much of Michael Seto's early research has focused on the psychological characteristics of sex offenders and their risk for reoffending. His latest research has focused on sex offending in cyberspace, specifically around the link between the use of indecent images of children and contact offending. Furthermore, he and his colleagues have found that the same kinds of risk factors are valid for online offenders as they are for conventional contact offenders, including age, criminal history, substance use, and sexual attraction to children.
2 Typically abused adolescents who may have perceived the abuse as a love affair.

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